

Citation for published version:

Kuchah, K 2018, 'Early English medium instruction in Francophone Cameroon: The injustice of equal opportunity', *System*, vol. 73, pp. 37-47. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2017.10.001>

DOI:

[10.1016/j.system.2017.10.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2017.10.001)

Publication date:

2018

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

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Pre-publication Version:

Journal: *System* (Special Issue, SES and Young Learners)

Early English medium instruction in Francophone Cameroon: the injustice of equal opportunity

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Abstract

This paper reports on part of a study which sought to understand the motives behind the recent surge in the number of Francophone children pursuing English-medium education (EMI) in a country such as Cameroon where social class and, in some cases, potential social class is often intertwined with French language and a Francophone political identity. The paper examines children's learning experiences as well as the school and out-of-school affordances for learning in English. Findings from data collected through interviews with school authorities as well as parents and school children from different socioeconomic backgrounds suggest that the policy discourse of social justice and quality Education for All is not sufficiently matched by learning affordances in state schools and as a result, its success is heavily reliant on out-of-school

1. Introduction & Overview

The English language has fast become the language of the world and many countries, eager to train citizens to be competitive in the global market (Pinon & Haydon 2010) are including English language in school curriculums (Graddol, 2006; Nunan, 2003; Vavrus, 2002). Deardon (2014, 2) reports that in many parts of the world, there has been a fast-moving shift from English as a foreign language (EFL) to English as medium of instruction (EMI) for academic subjects. In sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries the lowering age for exposure to English instruction (Cameron, 2003) means that more and more children are experiencing formal education in a language different from their home languages and in learning environments that may not meet the minimum conditions for effective language learning (Kuchah, 2016a). Studies that have examined the challenges to education in SSA (e.g., Muthwii, 2001; Nakabugo, 2008; O'Sullivan, 2006; Tembe, 2006) have revealed that the implementation of the Education for All (EFA) policy (UNESCO, 1990) through the provision of free and compulsory primary education in state schools has not been adequately matched with sufficient increase in infrastructural and resource provision and as a result, has further exacerbated existing challenges to education as a whole and to English language education in particular.

The list of challenges is long (see for example Ampiah, 2008; Shamim and Kuchah, 2016; UIS, 2016) and often confounded in a country like Cameroon where the language of instruction presents a barrier to

parental involvement in education for children whose parents are not educated in the language of their schooling (Gfeller & Robinson, 1998; Tadadjeu, 1990). While in some SSA countries there has been, at least in principle, a shift to mother tongue instruction in the first few years of primary education with a transition to a foreign language at a later stage, Cameroon has maintained French and English as mediums of instruction in French-medium (Francophone) and English-medium (Anglophone) schools. In line with its adherence to commitments taken within the framework of different United Nations conventions (e.g., UNESCO 1990; 2000), Cameroon also opted for free and compulsory basic education in 1998, entrusting parents with the 'prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children' (UN Declaration of Human Rights, 2015, Article 26). Within the framework of government's commitment to offering equal opportunities for children to pursue education in any state school of their choice and with only two options – French-Medium or English-medium education - available to parents, there has been a recent surge in the number of children from Francophone homes, irrespective of the family affordances, being enrolled into Anglophone schools (Anchimbe, 2007; Fonyuy, 2010; Kouega, 2003) despite the demographic and political dominance of French in the country.

This paper examines the motives behind this surge in a country where socioeconomic status (SES) and in some cases, potential SES is often intertwined with political identities. Then it explores the educational experiences of children from different socioeconomic backgrounds to show how English-medium education might perpetrate socioeconomic divisions between children from rich and poor backgrounds. Larger scale quantitative studies have provided a panoramic picture of the relational impacts of socioeconomic status on learning achievement (e.g., Cheng & Kaplowitz, 2016; Sirin, 2005) and EFL learning motivation (e.g., Kormos & Kiddle, 2013; Lamb, 2012) but have not fully explained the day-to-day educational realities of young learners especially in underprivileged state school contexts. The study reported in this paper investigates the school and home learning affordances and experiences of francophone children who, because of their parents' decisions, attend English-medium primary schools. In particular, it explores the perspectives and learning experiences of two children from two different socioeconomic backgrounds, but with similar aspirations, in order to gain insights into how the opportunity for access to EMI may enhance or impede their chances of achieving quality and equitable basic education.

2. Background and Review of Literature

This section is divided into two main parts. In the first, I review the literature on language-in-education in Africa and examine how the historical and political developments in Cameroon have contributed to

the rise in EMI. In the second part, I discuss literature in relation to the perceived benefits of EMI and the socioeconomic factors that might impact on the attainment of such benefits.

2.1. Language-in-Education in Cameroon: a historical background.

The literature on language-in-education in developing world contexts (e.g., Brock-Utne 2010; Mulumba & Masaazi, 2012) has shown the potential role of language of instruction in promoting, stagnating or stifling quality learning especially in the early years of schooling. Research evidence on medium of instruction in sub-Saharan Africa, (e.g. Afolayan, 1976; Bunyi, 1997; Kamwendo, Hlongwa & Mkhize, 2014; Tadadjeu, 1990) unequivocally highlights the cognitive, cultural and developmental values of mother tongue instruction over the often estranging foreign languages currently in use in educational systems. No doubt therefore, international organisations African Union (2006), UNESCO (2003; 2005; 2015) and UNICEF (2007) have recognised the value of multilingualism and multilingual education in promoting quality and equitable basic education (See for example African Union, 2006; UNESCO, 2003; 2005; 2015; UNICEF, 2007). Despite this, some countries in sub-Saharan Africa, such as Cameroon, still continue to promote educational policies based on foreign languages.

In its present configuration, Cameroon is a result of two colonial entities – French administered ‘Republique du Cameroun’ and British administered ‘Southern Cameroons’ – agreeing to unite under a federal system of government at the dawn of independence in 1961 (Fonlon, 1969). Political mutations over the years resulted in a country with 10 regions, two of which are Anglophone and 8, Francophone and an official language policy which places English and French above its 286 local languages (Ethnologue, 2009). The decision to adopt these foreign languages as official languages of the country was based on the assumption that nationhood would better be achieved through linguistic homogeneity in these two ‘neutral’ languages. However, political tensions over the last three decades have shown that, far from being neutral languages, English and French have been instrumental in developing new ethno-political identities which threaten the very unity they were meant to preserve (Ayafor, 2005; Wolf, 2001). Recent protests in the Anglophone regions have exposed deep divisions and suspicions between Anglophones and Francophones with the former feeling undermined by a heavily centralised bureaucracy dominated by a Francophone political elite accused of using political powers to marginalise the English language and Anglophones (Dicklitch, 2011; Konings & Nyamnjoh, 1997; Ngwana, 2009). In an attempt to resolve this political crisis, the government undertook a broad-based reform in 1996, revising the constitution and giving English and French equal status, as opposed to previous constitutions which placed French above English, and guaranteeing the promotion of bilingualism in both languages. A subsequent Education law (No 98/004 of 14 April 1998) recognised

two coexisting sub-systems of education – English-medium and French-medium - each with its own organisational and assessment specificities. The law also reaffirmed the commitment of the State to ‘institute bilingualism at all levels of education *as a factor of national unity and integration* (my emphasis). To enforce bilingualism in the school system a number of other official policy documents were enacted including (i) ministerial order No. 21/E/59 of 15 May 1996 mandating ‘every primary school teacher [to] henceforth teach every subject on the school syllabus including the second official language subject’ (i.e., French to Anglophones and English to Francophones); (ii) Order No. 62/C/13/MINEDUC/CAB of 16 February 2001 introducing English language as a compulsory subject from the first year of francophone primary schools and French as a subject in Anglophone schools and (iii) a presidential decree No. 2002/004 of 4 January 2002, organizing the MoE created a General Inspectorate for the promotion of Bilingualism to oversee the teaching of the second official language (i.e., French to Anglophones and English to Francophones) in both the Anglophone and francophone sub-systems of education.

The politically motivated commitment to promoting bilingualism resulted in a language education policy with no clear-cut linguistic objectives and orientations (Echu 2004), giving rise to a variety of bilingualism models particularly in Francophone Cameroon, the focus of this paper (see Kuchah 2013). In Francophone state schools, teachers, who themselves were not proficient in English, were required to teach English in addition to teaching all other subjects of the curriculum in the medium of French. Kouega (1999) explains that parental dissatisfaction with the quality of English language provision in French-medium state schools and awareness of the international spread and importance of English language have pushed parents to look for what they perceive as better opportunities for the development of their children’s bilingual competencies. As a result, EMI has increasingly become the preferred option with large numbers of children from francophone homes now being enrolled into English-medium primary and secondary schools (see Anchimbe 2005; 2007; Kuchah 2013; Mforteh 2006) and studying alongside their Anglophone peers. While a few elitist private schools, mostly found in the two largest cities of the country, are able to provide considerable support for such children, state sector schools which enrol 75.8% of primary school children in the country (UIS, 2016) face huge infrastructural and resource problems which negatively affect teaching and learning.

2.2. Early EMI: perceived benefits, practical challenges and possibilities.

While EMI has been the norm in many former British colonies in SSA including Anglophone Cameroon, its rise in non-British colonial territories is not unique to Francophone Cameroon (see for example Milligan, Clegg, and Tikly 2016, for the case of Rwanda). Deardon (2014) provides evidence from 55

countries that public and private educational institutions at all stages are increasingly adapting EMI. Amongst these are 52.7% of public primary schools. Studies that have examined the global spread of English and EMI (e.g., Dearden 2014; Pinon & Haydon 2010) suggest that in many countries, particularly across the global South, there is an assumed relationship between proficiency in English and economic development of a country. Local research on the spread of EMI in Cameroon has pointed to two main forces. On the one hand, Chiatoh (2014) and Nana (2013) have explained EMI from the perspective of the pervasive influence of colonialism on the country's educational system arguing that 'decades of educational colonization and [colonial] language dominance have produced inferiority complexes so that the local or indigenous languages [...] because of their unofficial status, are perceived as liabilities rather than assets' (Chiatoh 2014, 32). In fact, this situation has persisted despite the recognition, by local linguists, and widespread use, of creole languages such as Pidgin/Kamtok and Camfranglais (Anchimbe 2006; Sala 2009; Ubanako & Muyia. 2014) which are, for many learners, the only familiar languages. Esch's (2010) study with primary school teachers in Cameroon demonstrates how the use of punishment to exclude these local languages from the school domain *institutes* an epistemic injustice. Esch further argues that this phenomenon has transformed teachers' 'habitus' so that the way they conceptualise 'language' falls outside their notion of what they speak at home. In other words, the systematic elimination of students' local and/or familiar languages from the school domain is performative and seems to have been internalised by the teachers. In EMI schools therefore, apart from the few hours of French language teaching (see order No. 21/E/59 above) there is a strong emphasis, in the national syllabus (Ministry of National Education 2000) on, and a strict adherence by school authorities and teachers to, an English-only policy (Alobwede 1998; Esch 2010; Kuchah 2016b). Such a policy has been shown to pose significant barriers to the quality of learning (Ampiah, 2008; Opoku-Amankwa 2009; Sawamura & Sifuna 2008) for children whose home language is not the language of schooling. It also prevents parents who themselves may not be proficient in the language of schooling from engaging directly with the education of their children (Bamgbose 2014; Williams & Cooke 2002). For a country that aims to promote bilingualism, such a policy seems subtractive and therefore counter-productive to the development of bilingual competencies. In fact, recent theories of language acquisition which are based on a dynamic model of bilingualism/multilingualism (Cummins 2015; Garcia & Li Wei 2014) see languages as interrelated and fluid in the human brain. In this respect, bilingual pedagogies such as code-switching (Milligan, Clegg & Tikly, 2016) and translanguaging (Makalela, 2015) have been shown to be effective in multilingual African contexts and could usefully be applied in a country like Cameroon where forms of linguistic fusion already exist in creole languages.

Studies that have examined the motivations for EMI in Francophone Cameroon (Abongdia & Willans 2014; Anchimbe 2007; Fonyuy 2010; Kuchah 2013; 2016b; Mforteh 2005), on the other hand, have

argued that the phenomenon is mainly linked to individual instrumental benefits, rather than to national economic and developmental gains. For example, survey studies reveal that the push for increased proficiency in English language by Francophones is driven by job opportunities in multinational companies within the country and internationally (Pinon & Haydon 2010) as well as intentions to migrate to English speaking countries such as the US, UK and South Africa (Mforteh 2005). Anchimbe (2007) and Mbuh (2000) have noted that far from being a factor of national unity and integration as inscribed in the 1996 constitution, the promotion of bilingualism and the right to any of the two mediums of instruction have offered Francophone Cameroonians the opportunity to pursue EMI in order to adopt hybrid identities that give them advantages over their Anglophone counterparts. In this regards, Anchimbe (2007) describes as linguistic opportunism, the conscious linguistic/identity mutations of some Francophone graduates from EMI institutions whose sole motive is to maximise their individual benefits from the opportunities offered by the dual cultural and linguistic context of the country.

The case of young learners is particularly interesting because their educational choices are often determined by parental aspirations. Deardon (2014, 7) explains that the growth in EMI is partly a result of parents' perceptions of EMI 'as a way of enabling their children to join a social elite and partake of the benefits that it can bring'. However, it has also been pointed out that questions of justice, and human rights are associated with EMI (Deardon 2014; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009) especially when it comes to providing quality and equitable education (Tomasevski, 2003) to children from poorer backgrounds. A human rights-based perspective to language-in-education (UNESCO 2003) focuses on children's rights to access education in the mother tongue as well as to be introduced to a global language. This perspective promotes a mother tongue-based bilingual approach to education in which both the local and international language are supported (see for example Phillipson et al. 2014). Tikly (2016, 412) argues that rights-based approaches 'may appear too homogenising in their implications for addressing the complex linguistic needs and identities of diverse groups in multilingual, postcolonial settings.' As has been explained earlier, the multiplicity of students' local languages together with socio-political identities based on two foreign languages as well as the absence of a political commitment to mother tongue education further complicate the Cameroonian educational landscape. As a result, existing rights-based perspectives may not sufficiently explain the local realities of language-in-education in this country.

A social justice perspective (Fraser, 2013), on the other hand, focuses on 'parity of participation' arguing that maintaining social justice entails breaking down institutionalised barriers to equitable social

interaction. Dismantling injustices, Fraser argues, is premised on three dimensions of social justice: redistribution, recognition and participation. In the context of this paper, *redistribution* refers to the provision of equitable access to linguistic and educational resources so that children from socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged families would be able to learn in the same conditions. *Recognition* entails identifying, acknowledging and including the linguistic knowledge of socially marginalised learners in the curriculum whilst *participation* refers to the right of individuals or groups to fair participation in decisions about their linguistic and educational rights. Researchers in language-in-education (e.g., Bamgbose 2014) have argued that observed inadequacies in attaining development goals in Africa cannot be fully accounted for without reference to the role of foreign languages of instruction in barring community participation in the education of school children. In the case of multilingual Cameroon, this constitutes a lack of *recognition* of children's knowledge of home and familiar languages in facilitating learning. In addition to the language factor, Educational research studies (Blanden & Gregg, 2004; Cheng & Kaplowitz, 2016; Duncan & Murnane, 2011) have identified socioeconomic factors as instrumental in determining the quality and outcomes of learning as well as future opportunities. Empirical research studies in the West (e.g., Phillips 2011; Reardon 2011), Asia (e.g., Cheng & Kaplowitz 2016; Zhao et al. 2012) and Africa (Pretorius & Currin 2010; Pufall et al. 2016) point to an alarmingly widening achievement gap between students from poor homes and their peers from rich homes. In the case of Cameroon where there are issues of resource provision in state schools (Kuchah & Smith 2011; Kuchah 2016a) such a phenomenon can be explained as a *redistributive* injustice because existing socioeconomic disparities are perpetuated through the non-provision of learning resources to poor children. What is more, the absence of children's voices in the policy enactment process as well as in most research on language-in-education in Cameroon constitutes *participatory* injustice. This paper takes the view that quality education in state schools in a developing country like Cameroon needs to be guaranteed through mechanisms that foster justice at the level of redistribution and recognition and in highlighting children's voices, the study also hopes to promote children's right to *participation* in the development of knowledge and understanding of their educational realities.

To summarise, the promotion of bilingualism in a multilingual country where education is conducted in two Foreign languages (French and English) coupled with a policy framework providing equal opportunity of access to free basic education in any of the two sub-systems of education (Francophone or Anglophone) has meant that parents from all socioeconomic strata are free to enrol their children into either English- or French- medium schools irrespective of their predominant/familiar home language. The result has been a recent surge in the number of Francophone children pursuing EMI in Cameroon, despite the demographic and political dominance of French in the country. What is more, the insistence on an English-only policy is an added barrier to learning in the medium of English. As the

literature demonstrates, the discourse of justice and equity in education is linked to linguistic and socioeconomic factors and as a result, to ensure that policy benefits all school children, it is important to unravel the hidden complexities that might blur the injustice perpetrated by seemingly just and equitable policies. This study sets out to achieve this by addressing the following research questions:

1. What are the motivations of francophone parents for enrolling their children in English medium schools?
2. What are the within-school and out-of-school affordances for quality EMI for children from different socioeconomic backgrounds?
3. How do these affordances impact on children's learning experiences?

3. The Study

3.1. Context of the study

The data discussed in this paper was collected between September 2015 and August 2016 and is part of an ongoing study which was guided by the principle that 'quality education is a fundamental human right and a gateway to individual opportunity' (UNESCO 2013, p.9). Part of this data, collected from one of two research sites, Yaounde, has been presented in a previous paper (see Kuchah 2016b). The contextual focus of this paper is a state EMI primary school (henceforth referred to as EcoBA (Ecole Bilingue Anglophone)) in a predominantly Francophone peri-urban community in Douala, the 'Economic Capital' of Cameroon. As a state school, EcoBA has structural and functional similarities with other state schools in Cameroon. Cameroon is still one of 37 countries in the world with severe teacher gaps (UIS 2016) and although there have been significant improvements in teacher recruitment, the benefits have been dissipated by teacher attrition and growing enrolment rates. As a result, the ratio of pupils per trained teacher in 2015 stood at 71:1 (UIS 2016). Other figures from the UIS (2016) database reveal that the average number of pupils per textbook in 2012 was 12 for reading and 13.9 for mathematics. Also, in 2011 (the most recent data available) access to basic services in state schools were very limited with 91.4% of schools without electricity, 70.2% without water and 57.6% without toilets. The overall school completion rate stood at 67.85% with variations in the completion rates of children from different socioeconomic levels ranging from 18.07% for children from the poorest quantile of the population to 93.68% for children from the richest quantile. The choice of EcoBA was guided more by my familiarity with the school and the aim of this study – to explore insights into the lived experiences of Francophone school children from different socioeconomic backgrounds – rather than by the quest for representativeness

3.2. Design and participants

The broader study from which this paper draws was designed as a participatory case study (Yin, 2014) using qualitative methods of data collection and analysis to understand the lived experiences and perspectives of Francophone children in year six (final year) of English medium schools in Yaounde and Douala, the two largest cosmopolitan cities of Cameroon. Perspectives of parents, teachers and policy makers were also sought with the view to understand and complement student perspectives. The data presented in this paper was collected from two pupils, Aisha and Nina and their parents (Ma Aisha and Ma Nina respectively) as well as the head teacher (HT) of the EcoBA. With the help of the HT, parents were initially contacted for consent to interview their children and themselves. After individual explanatory meetings with parents only six parents consented to participate. Of these six, only four were happy to provide information about their socioeconomic status (SES) and were therefore retained alongside their children for the larger study. SES in this study was based on a combination of four main indicators drawn from the literature, including parental income, parental education, parental occupation and home resources such as educational resources and support services (Blanden & Gregg 2004; Duncan & Brook-Gunn 1997; Ermisch & Pronzato 2010; Sirin 2005; McLoyd 1998; Pufall et al., 2016; Zhao, et al., 2012). The focus on Aisha and Nina in this paper is based on a number of reasons: (a) their parents fall roughly within the richest and the poorest quantiles of the Cameroonian society respectively, (b) both have siblings pursuing French-medium education (c) they both live with their mothers who are single parents and (d) they, and their parents have similar aspirations of them becoming medical doctors in the future. In relation to 'a' above, Ma Aisha was a Senior Customs Officer with a post graduate university degree and a monthly salary of XAF 400,000 (\$655.04) at the topmost scale of the Cameroonian civil service. In addition, she received other work bonuses. On the other hand, Ma Nina was a self-employed dressmaker with two years of secondary school education. She had an irregular income - depending on how much work she did – which she estimated at XAF 30,000 (\$48.8) a month, an income significantly lower than the poverty threshold of \$1.90 per day (World Bank 2014).

3.3. Data collection and analysis procedures

Data from child participants were collected in two phases, prior to, and after their parents' interviews. The first phase followed the procedure described in Kuchah (2016b) and consisted of a language card game (Esch 2012) and follow up group interviews following recommendations in the literature (e.g., Christensen 2004; Pinter, Kuchah & Smith 2013; Mayall, 2008) which point to the potential of group interviews to minimise the effects of adult-child power differentials (Kuchah & Pinter 2012). The second phase consisted of individual follow up interviews based on arts-based methods (Milligan 2017) which consisted of visual representations of real or ideal home learning spaces and the future aspirations of both children. Data from parents were collected through semi-structured interviews and focused mainly on their motivations for sending their children to an English medium school as well as the support

mechanisms which ensure that their children attain the perceived benefits of early EMI. Data from the HT was collected through several informal conversations over a longer period of time. Interviews with both parents were conducted in French while the other interviews were collected in English and French as determined by child participants. Data were audio-recorded, transcribed and translated where necessary before being analysed and interpreted thematically through a combination of procedures and techniques recommended in the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006; Richards, 2009).

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1. Parents' motivations: similar aspirations different understandings.

Parent interviews revealed interesting personal insights into the thinking behind their decisions to enrol their children in EcoBa. Ma Nina made the decision for her daughter to pursue EMI on the basis that 'it is not good to put all eggs in one basket' and having enrolled her first daughter in a Francophone school, she decided that EMI was the other 'basket'. To her, the presence of a state Anglophone school in close proximity and the knowledge that 'the law gives me the right to send my child to an Anglophone school' was an added incentive. She was also motivated by other francophone children pursuing EMI in the neighbourhood and had 'put the idea in [Nina's] head from her early years that she will go to an Anglophone school.' On the other hand, for Aisha and her mother, the decision for EMI was mutually agreed upon; this was initially motivated by Aisha's interactions and friendships with Anglophone children in her neighbourhood as well as Ma Aisha's previous academic and professional experiences. Ma Aisha regretted having missed the opportunity, in secondary school, of 'taking English seriously' and explained how this affected her negatively when she eventually was faced with Anglophone professors at university. Her 'extremely low' English language proficiency had also cost her opportunities to work for multinational companies: 'I lost two international job opportunities because of my bad English.' For this reason, she was ready to invest her resources for her daughter to achieve what she had failed to achieve: 'I don't want [Aisha] to miss the opportunities I missed, I want her to do what I could not do...her world is even more dominated by English than mine.'

There were similarities in both parents' aspirations for their children; they both held that, early EMI would enable their children become 'perfect bilinguals' in order to increase their chances of finding a good job. Ma Nina explained that 'in this country, everyone knows that the best jobs belong to the most bilingual Cameroonians, so I want my daughter to have the best possible job.' This was corroborated by Ma Aisha who felt that 'Anglophone education offers a lot of advantages for the development of bilingualism in Francophone children [and that] Aisha will be better off than her elder brother, because

she is perfectly bilingual'. In relation to the specific benefits of EMI to the attainment of their children's aspirations of becoming Medical doctors, both parents' perspectives showed significant similarities although Ma Nina was flexible about her daughter's future prospects, probably due to the challenges which she was facing (see section 4.2.2). She explained that:

...if she [Nina] does not become a medical doctor, at least she can be a nurse and work anywhere in the country....even here in Douala, many private clinics need bilingual nurses because we have people from all over Cameroon and other countries like Nigeria doing business here. [...] I have even heard that they employ nurses in South Africa and England and the US, she can find a job there. I know an Anglophone lady whose daughter is a nurse abroad; she sends her a lot of money.

While Ma Nina primarily drew her understandings from the realities around her, Ma Aisha on her part, drew from her own educational experience and that of her 16 year old first son attending a Francophone secondary school:

I thought I could help him by employing a home English teacher, but that has not worked; for the past three years, his English has not really improved. [...] He continues to fail English; I think it is because he started to learn real English only in secondary school. [...] So I decided that my daughters [Aisha and her younger sister] will be Anglophones from the start.

The aspirations of both parents are clearly instrumental (Gardner 2006; Masgoret & Gardner 2003) and are consistent with previous studies in this context which argue that EMI is perceived by francophone Cameroonian parents as a gateway to individual advantages for their children (Abongdia & Willans 2014; Anchimbe 2007; Fonyuy 2010) rather than for national development as suggested, for example, by Casale and Posel (2011) and Dearden (2014).

4.2. School and out-of-school affordances for learning

4.2.1. Learning affordances within EcoBA

Discussions with the HT revealed a number of issues which he thought affected the overall quality of teaching and learning in the school. In relation to how quality education was guaranteed within EcoBA, the HT explained that his staff were all qualified and had the necessary content and pedagogic knowledge required for quality teaching. In their practices, 'they take into consideration differences between slow and fast learners and prepare extra activities to support slow learners where possible....we insist on English only so that the children can acquire it quickly.' However, he identified two challenges: first, 'many children do not have textbooks so we have to copy out everything on the

blackboard...this makes it impossible for teachers to cover the syllabus.’ Second, he noted the problem of low teacher motivation; EcoBA had five trained teachers although only three of them and the head teacher were formally employed by the state. The other two were paid irregular monthly stipends from voluntary contributions by some Parents. Given their low pay package, the HT explained that ‘teacher motivation [was] a problem.... Sometimes they are more committed to their private classes [paid home tuition] than to the children here... they have to survive.’

Besides, EcoBA had six classrooms accommodating a total of 384 children (an average of 64 children per class) and with only five teachers, one teacher was assigned to teach the two final year classes. The school had two toilets, no electricity or water and in some classes, there were up to four children sitting in desks meant for two. The HT’s office consisted of a table and two chairs on the veranda of a building that hosted three of the six classrooms. Since its opening, EcoBA had never received textbooks from the MoE, but had had an annual supply of a ‘minimum package’ consisting of basic stationery. For the current year, EcoBA had received 2 boxes of chalk, 6 lesson planning books, 6 class registers, 24 folders, a stapler, 4 ledgers, 3 blackboard rulers, and a first aid box. The financial provision from the MoE consisted of an annual functioning budget of XAF 20,000 (\$32.74) and a refurbishment and teacher allowance project fund calculated on the basis of the number of students enrolled in the school and amounting to XAF67,615 (\$110.71) for the 2015-16 school year. These practical, economic and material challenges have been shown to compound the work of teachers, and impact negatively on teacher motivation and the quality of education, especially in state school systems in the developing world (Ampiah 2008; Shamim and Kuchah 2016; Kuchah 2016a; UIS 2016).

Language proficiency issues also constituted a major challenge for quality learning in EcoBA, due to the increasing number of children from Francophone homes. The HT explained that ‘Parents bring children here who cannot speak even one word in English; even the parents speak only French. ...we have to struggle to help them. [...] even in class six, some of them are still struggling with the [English] language.’ He however, acknowledged that the language issue was not restricted to Francophone children: ‘French is a big problem to them, but it is also a problem for Anglophone children because that [French] is the language they speak with their friends in the locality.’ He added that even in the final year of primary school, some children were still not able to ‘read and write well in English.’ To him, the major deciding factor for quality learning outcomes was the level of home support the children received: ‘I think the difference comes from the support they get at home...but a majority of our parents are poor, they don’t even come to PTA meetings let alone buy books for the children.’ Two main issues arise from the HT’s perspectives here: first the difference between the language of the school and the home/parents

language means that parents are unable to actively engage in the learning of their children. The added insistence on English only pedagogy in a multilingual context like Cameroon has been shown to pose an additional barrier to the quality of learning (Ampiah, 2008; Opoku-Amankwa 2009; Sawamura & Sifuna, 2008). Second, there is evidence here that parental socioeconomic status might influence parents' abilities to provide the additional home support which can mitigate the negative effects of school challenges, and enhance learning. However, this means that while many parents continue to perceive and believe in early English immersion as an access to the benefits of social elitism (Deardon 2014), their actual socioeconomic challenges might militate against the quality of their children's learning.

4.2.2. Out-of-school learning affordances.

Data about out-of-school learning resources was collected through parent and child participant interviews. I asked Both Aisha and Nina to draw a picture of their actual or ideal home learning spaces as a basis for the follow up individual interviews (FII) through which they identified home language learning affordances (see summary in table 1 below) which I then used to confirm what parents had told me.

Table 1: Out-of-school affordances for English language learning

Home resources	Nina	Aisha
Home teacher(s)	none	2
Reading room	No	Yes
Prescribed textbooks	1 (English language)	All subjects
Computer	None	Desktop computer and iPad
Supplementary language materials	None	Computer language games, crossword puzzles, story books
Holiday classes	none	Summer school in a local English language centre (June every year)
Parental engagement with learning	Yes	Yes
Other affordances	Home TV	Home TV, Holidays with English speaking family friends

As table 1 indicates, there was a great disparity between the out-of-school learning affordances for Nina and Aisha which might be attributed to the SES of both parents. Clearly, beyond the school, Aisha was better supported materially in her English language learning than Nina. In fact, even in terms of parental

engagement with their children's learning, there were differences. Ma Nina simply encouraged Nina to 'read her books very well' but never actually monitored or supported her learning directly. She attended PTA meetings sparingly 'because when they speak in big English, I don't understand so I just wait for the HT to send information to me through Nina.' This limited engagement in her daughter's learning was compounded by her inability to buy her books: '

I know that my daughter is struggling, but what can I do? I don't make a lot of money and I have to look after two of them and my sick mother, only from my little business....The teachers are trying their best, and she has been improving...all I can do is to encourage her to work hard in school so she can save us from poverty in the future.'

She was quite aware of the difficulties her daughter faced but seemed to have no control over the situation: 'What do you expect me to do in my situation?' On several occasions, she referred to her religious belief that 'God will take care of her [Nina] adding that 'she is still a child, she will do well... I am raising money to get her to join a group of children whose parents want to pay a teacher to help them prepare exams for one month; that is all I can do now.' On the other hand, Ma Aisha in her spare time, acted as a 'student' to her daughter:

I also want to know what she is learning in school, so I make her explain things to me in French, but sometimes, I insist that she should explain to me in English..., if I don't understand, I ask further questions. [...] She is the one who explains the News on CNN and Nigerian films to me....my chief translator.

Unlike Ma Nina, Ma Aisha attended PTA meetings regularly and had enquired regularly about Aisha's classroom engagement, from her teacher. She had phone contacts of both the HT and the class teacher and was happy to donate to projects in the school although she was aware that 'the school alone cannot provide [Aisha] the quality of education I want for her.'

There is evidence here of some form of parental encouragement in both cases but this is not matched by a similar level of provision of learning resources at home. There are differences in socioeconomic status as well as cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) between both parents which impact on the nature of resources and personal engagement they commit to their children's' learning and this was evident in the huge differences between both children's learning experiences (see 4.3 below). Ma Aisha's level of involvement and Aisha's learning experience seem to support research which demonstrates the positive effects of parental education and family income on child education (Davis-Kean, 2005; Dubow et al., 2009). Research evidence has shown that gaps in children's school achievement arise from issues outside the school, rather than just on school practices (Goodall 2017) and the differences shown here between the home affordances for both children as well as accounts of their learning, by both parents, resonate with suggestions in previous studies elsewhere (e.g., Opoku-Amankwa 2009; Sawamura &

Sifuna, 2008) which show that while EMI might benefit children from socioeconomically privileged homes, it can be a barrier for children from poor homes.

4.3. Children's learning experiences and prospects.

The data from child participants presented here was collected in a group interview (GI) and in a follow up individual interview (FII). The procedure for GIs was similar to that outlined in Kuchah (2016b) and started with a preliminary language card game in which participants had to select from a number of cards, the one with the name of the language(s) they would love to be interviewed in. Nina selected French and spoke to me in French in both the GI and FII, clearly referring to herself as Francophone although 'my mother says that I am an Anglophone because I attend this school.' During the GI, Nina requested translation from her peers several times and spoke very little despite my encouragement. In the FII she was more open and explained her challenges in French with little visible inhibition. Aisha on the other hand selected the English & French card although in both the GI and FII, she spoke fluently in English, with little use of French words and expressions and referred to herself as an Anglophone. Child interviews revealed similarities but also huge differences between the learning experiences of both children. Both children acknowledged that learning in the medium of English was initially very difficult for them:

I was happy to go to school, but when I came to this school, I could not understand anything...I used to cry sometimes. ...now I don't cry anymore, but I still don't understand many things and if I ask questions in French, the teacher will shout at me and the other children will laugh at me.... So I just stay quiet. (Nina, FII)

This was consistent with what she had earlier said in the GI when she justified her choice of French on the basis that 'I understand English a bit now but I cannot speak a lot in English; I prefer French because I speak it all the time.' In response to what she thought would help her understand the content of learning, Nina explained that 'sometimes I am lost in class...if the teacher could explain the lesson to me in French, or a give me a summary in French, I will be able to understand more' (FII). Though it was not possible to see her school records, both Nina and her mother confirmed that Nina's school performance was low and she had repeated two classes in the course of her education in Ecoba. Aisha, on her part, also explained that although she was encouraged go to an Anglophone school because her friends were Anglophones; she had problems in her early years 'because I was not understanding the teacher very well in English.' However, she felt that she had improved a lot over the years and could 'speak English very well.' She justified her choice of the English & French card on the basis that she was not sure whether my questions will be difficult, 'so I selected this card so that if you ask me a difficult question which I cannot answer very well in English, I will answer in French.' In the GI, she spoke a lot about her

class teacher and how she 'love[d] the way he explains very well, the lesson,' and was less concerned about issues like lack of textbooks and opportunities for communicating in English out of school, which the other children raised. In the FII, she displayed a feeling of language and cognitive superiority over some of her peers:

Aisha: I think I am better than many of my friends because I speak English more better than them

Kuchah: Really? How do you know you speak better than them?

Aisha: Because the teacher does not always correct me like he corrects them...he even calls me to explain somethings to them something we read in English or another subject.

[...]

Kuchah: And why do you think you speak English better than them?

Aisha: I think it is because my teachers in the house help me understand better everything that we learn in school. [...] My friends are Anglophones...and they speak only English in their house, so I spend a lot of holidays with them and learn English better.

In discussions about their home learning affordances, both children had dedicated reading periods but Nina explained that sometimes, she had to 'sell oranges [and] raise money' for the home and this affected her reading because 'when I am tired, I just sleep.'(FII) Aisha on the other hand was well provided for and had time to 'eat and sleep a bit when I go home. Then when my teacher comes, I study for two hours every day'(FII). Further probing into both children's home study routines revealed that overall, in a week, Aisha spent a minimum of 10 hours on home tutoring and some more time on individual reading and other learning resources listed in table 1, while Nina spent less than 4 hours on individual home study per week; most of her weekdays and weekends were spent either selling fruits or 'play[ing] with [her] friends'.

The evidence from both children indicates that learning in the medium of English, a language that is not their familiar home or community language can be (and in the case of Nina, *is*) a barrier to accessing curriculum content (Brock-Utne et al. 2010; Madonsela 2015; Williams, 2011). What is more, the absence of bilingual pedagogies which recognise the value of children's familiar languages in supporting learning in the target language (Makalela 2015; Milligan, Clegg & Tikly, 2016) means that Nina is unable to participate on a par with Aisha in learning. While Aisha, owing to the additional home affordances, has been able to develop English skills which help her access the curriculum, Nina, whose sole access to English language is the classroom and whose home affordances are restricted, is still finding EMI a challenge. Nina's experience confirms suggestions in the literature (Akyeampong et.al. 2007; Kuchah 2016b; Probyn 2006) that EMI affects the education of poor children negatively and can potentially widen the gap between the rich and the poor.

5. Conclusion

The aim of the study reported in this paper was to explore and examine the motivations of Francophone parents to send their children to English medium primary schools and to investigate the school and home affordances for learning as well as the learning experiences of Francophone children from two socioeconomic backgrounds. The findings reveal that parental motivation is mainly instrumental, based on the perceived economic advantages of English language (Deardon 2014) and the belief that an early start in English, as provided for by EMI would guarantee English language proficiency. However, an examination of both the school and out-of-school affordances for learning as well as insights from children's accounts of their learning experiences show that the opportunity to pursue EMI is not necessarily a guarantee for English proficiency and quality learning. There are significant resource limitations in state schools which militate against quality education making parental support even more compelling. The evidence from this study is consistent with a previous study in a similar context (Kuchah 2016b) in revealing the impact of parental socioeconomic status on Francophone children's overall learning experiences in English medium state schools. More importantly, this study shows that the fundamental rights to quality basic education (UNESCO 2013) might be restricted for poor children because state school systems in Cameroon are not yet able to provide the basic resources that guarantee quality and equitable EMI. In promoting free and compulsory basic education, without a concomitant provision of learning resources, in promoting free access to EMI without ensuring parity of participation for learners from all socioeconomic and linguistic backgrounds, EMI in Francophone Cameroon seems to be perpetuating existing social injustices against the poor. At the moment, the discourse of equal opportunity, social justice and EFA, as manifested through English medium education for young learners in this predominantly Francophone country is still very much a rhetoric and its success is heavily reliant on out-of-school affordances for learning provided by parents. This suggests that for the majority of children who rely on the state for their education, the promotion of English-French bilingualism as well as discourses that project English language as the gateway to economic gains actually make the opportunity of access to English medium primary schools an act of injustice against the poor.

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